application, submitted in 1985, I thought: "Fuck it. I'll send what *I* want to send, not what I think they want to read." That application contained poems from the *Conditions* manuscript, poems that spoke directly about homosexual and African American experiences. The application was approved for funding.

My first self-published chapbook, *Earth Life,* released in 1985, was funded entirely with my own savings. My grandmother had never read *Earth Life,* and to my knowledge, she had never been told by my family that I am gay. I never told her because the family felt it best that she not know this, although at times I felt compelled to tell her, especially during the two weeks we were last together. Before departing from Washington, D.C., I promised to maintain my silence regarding my sexuality. My mother later told me, "Your grandmother always kept you up in prayer," and I always felt like telling Mother, "I think it's because she knew I am gay."

During that two-week visit, the bond between Grandmother and me strengthened itself on pure love. It was the same love that helped to heal me when I was born prematurely with a heart murmur. It was the same love that disciplined me when I spent my summers with her as a youngster. And it was the same love that summoned me to Columbia with two great-grands in tow.

Grandmother told me that my cooking reminded her of Essex, my late grandfather. For a number of years he had owned a small restaurant in Columbia that was off-limits to my mother and her siblings because the restaurant attracted a crowd that was a bit risqué for Grandmother's tastes. My mother and her siblings were supposed to go to the restaurant *only* for the purpose of delivering the peach cobblers and apple pies Grandmother baked at home. But my mother tells me that she and her siblings would often sneak by the restaurant after school to visit with Grandaddy. He would serve them lemonade or soda pop and hurry them on their way so

that they would not incur Grandmother's wrath for being too tardy getting home from school.

Although I promised my family I would not reveal my sexuality to Grandmother, I took a copy of *Earth Life* to give to her. On an early afternoon, a week after arriving in Columbia, while Grandmother sat rocking on the front porch, and while my niece and nephew settled into their afternoon nap, I pulled out the copy of *Earth Life* knowing the moment to give it to her had come. I considered it to be an innocent gift, although subconsciously I realized that she would learn more from it than I would ever be able to tell her in this life.

On that particular afternoon, I was going to the barber to get my hair cut. I gave Grandmother *Earth Life* before I left. I didn't think she would read it immediately, but she did, during the hour I was away. When I returned, she was still on the porch rocking. She complimented my haircut as I pulled up a chair to sit with her. *Earth Life* and her reading glasses were resting in her lap. She was rocking, gently, her eyes focused straight ahead above the tops of the blossoming rose bushes growing around the porch. I thought she was focusing on the red rose petals or the sweet fruit on the fig tree just across the yard. I carefully ventured to break the silence enveloping us. "Grandmother," I hesitantly began, "it looks as though you read *Earth Life* while I was at the barber."

"Yes, I did," she replied, and she continued to rock. After a pause, she said, "These are very good poems, Essex, but they're a bit disturbing." Another moment of silence enveloped us. "You know I'm so proud of all my grands," she continued, "all of you are doing so well." She then looked me directly in the eye and smiled just a little slyly before asking, "Essex, do the authorities know what you're writing about?"

Perched on the edge of tension as I had been, I was completely unprepared for her question. I threw my head